

DE VALERA REMEMBERING: A STUDY IN MEMORY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION

Michael Böss

The introductory chapter of Lord Longford and Thomas P. O'Neill's *Eamon de Valera* may be read as the story of how de Valera grew up to identify with the lives and conditions of the ordinary Catholic rural labouring families among whom he was raised. In time, he was to identify these people as *the* Irish people, for example, when he responded in Dáil Éireann to a slur on his claimed foreignness:

I have been brought up amongst the Irish people. I was reared in a labourer's cottage here in Ireland. I have not lived solely amongst the intellectuals. The first fifteen years of my life that formed my character were lived amongst the Irish people down in Limerick; therefore I know what I am talking about; and whenever I wanted to know what the Irish people wanted I had only to examine my own heart and it told me straight off what the Irish people wanted. (*Dáil Éireann, Public Sessions 275*)

In the biography by Lord Longford and O'Neill, de Valera is represented as Irish to the bone: as personifying traditional rural values and representing a nation which had been exiled from its true self, but which had finally been vindicated after centuries of struggle against all odds. A key to their biographical narrative, thus, is a passage towards the end:

An Irish immigrant mother – a Spanish-American father dying when he was very small – a return [sic] to Ireland, his mother remaining in America – an upbringing by an uncle in what he himself has called a labourer's cottage – no psychiatrist could have forecast the outcome of such an inheritance and early environment. The President never tired of expressing his gratefulness to his grandmother and his uncle Pat, but from his earliest years, without father and mother to guide him, he had to fend for himself compared with others. One cannot say what effect this must have had on a small boy's formation. In fact, he grew up with a strong confidence in himself, powerful family affection and a surpassing love of Ireland. (471-72)

In spite of the biographers' claim that no psychiatrist could have forecast the outcome of de Valera's upbringing, establishing mental connections between his childhood and manhood is precisely what a number of historians have tried to do.

Owen Dudley Edwards, for one, argues that the harsh circumstances and deprivations of his childhood affected de Valera's later social and national convictions. Edwards thinks that his "surpassing love of Ireland" can be reasonably seen as compensating for the lack of any permanent family and the rejection by his mother; suffice it to say [...] that it involved a massive self-identification" (28). Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh also finds the early Bruree years "crucial to de Valera's psychological development and to his own self-perception in his life," and he argues that de Valera's boyhood years reassured him in his self-image as representing the 'plain people of Ireland.' In other words: he was not the foreigner that some of his critics held him to

be (Lee & Ó Tuathaigh, 16-17). Joseph Lee is convinced that de Valera's memories of his childhood affected his later view of the role of women in Irish society. Lee claims that he subconsciously strove "to obliterate the memory of his own childhood," denying what had really happened. Instead he clung to "an ideal image of the Irish family as a loving haven of self-less accord." The social directives of the 1937 Constitution, thus, were written in a way which "made strangely little allowance" for women who shared the plight of his own mother (207). Thus, the general conclusion that historians have drawn is that de Valera's way of representing himself was a product of both construction and repression of memories.

In this essay I will take these suggestions a few steps further, on the basis of a reading of Lord Longford and O'Neill's account of de Valera's childhood, for which they strongly depended on de Valera's own version.

As the readers are informed in the "Prologue," O'Neill and Longford had had privileged access to de Valera's own library of private papers for a number of years. However, when writing the biography they compared their observations with de Valera's own account of his life. *Eamon de Valera* should therefore be read as a result of two processes of representation: that of O'Neill and Lord Longford and that of Eamon de Valera himself. It is the latter with which I will be concerned here.

The fact that de Valera's personal memories play such a "prominent part" (xx-xxi) and that he gave it his official approval as "authoritative" (xv) has, in the absence of a true autobiography, been seen as a blessing. As John Bowman says, the book represents "the nearest thing possible to an autobiography": a "preferred rationalisation at the end of his career, his final self-justification, echoing what he had been saying at crossroads, chapel gates and in the Dáil for the previous half century" (191). However, as I will demonstrate, the text does not only convey rationalised memory. In spite of its strong emphasis on matters of public interest, it also opens doors into the more irrational and secret layers of de Valera's mental world.

In order to limit my material to suit a study of this size, my focus will only be the first chapter of the book, which consists of a summary of de Valera's childhood.

My argument is that this chapter may be characterised as a multi-layered 'composure' in which de Valera's 'story' of his own life is integrated in both family memory and nationalist historical narrative. I suggest that this 'composed' story served to root de Valera in a genuine Irishry and thus give him the authority to speak on behalf of the Irish nation. However, it also involved a repression of painful feelings of personal abandonment and loss.

Although many interviews could be conducted on the basis of papers from de Valera's private library, there were none concerning his childhood. It appears that the two biographers had decided not to compensate for this by incorporating popular 'memories' and 'stories' which had been in circulation for decades and which had

appeared in early biographies such as the one by M.J. MacManus (1944). This choice probably reflects the personal wish of de Valera, who, in this way, was free to narrate this chapter of his life from his own point of view.

The reader may be struck by the high degree of selectivity and internal coherence in the resulting sparse account. It is clearly meant to stress the continuity between de Valera's childhood and his later political career. However, at times its character of edited narrative appears to cover up the gaps and disruptions that characterised de Valera's real life, and the reader may wonder about things lightly brushed over or omitted. Not surprisingly, the silences pertain especially to matters of a private nature. But the events and experiences brushed over – and the 'story line' itself – hold clues to an understanding of such silences. In order to explain this, I first need to discuss the nature of memory, especially the interaction between individual and social memory.

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs once suggested that a family, like any community and group, has its own peculiar mental world, which is structured by its collective memories. Halbwachs demonstrated how this mental world influences the formation of individual memory. He argued that the individual member of a family may recollect the past in his own manner, but is only able to retrieve and attach meaning to recalled events in the past by being a member of a kinship group that is constantly exchanging impressions and opinions about each other. Such exchanges take the form of shared 'family memories.' Family memories serve to preserve the mentality of the group by regulating expressions of feelings and articulating its general attitudes, norms, and beliefs (54-59). Individual memories are thus given shape and colour by 'stories' that families narrate about themselves and their members, and also by the way they relate to each other.

As for an individual's memories of his early childhood, family memories are particularly important since they often stem from stories he has been told about himself later in life. This means that memories which an individual may believe to be authentic are in fact recollections based on 'family memory.' Other memories may be of more personal origin, however, especially memories about events which have had a lasting significance. Such memories are pregnant with emotions and notions that have been associated with these events and experiences over time. Indeed, when certain scenes which took place in the family home are remembered particularly well, it may be because they represent a condensation of all the feelings that have been associated with them in the course of an individual's life. This means that such remembered scenes may in fact be made up of elements from several periods and events, before and/or after. Halbwachs explains this phenomenon with a reference to Chateaubriand's memory of how an evening was spent at the manor of Combourg when he was a child. And he asks,

is this an account of an event that happened only once? Was he particularly impressed, on one evening more than any other, by the silent comings and goings of his father, by the appearance of the hall, and by the details that he throws into relief in his depiction? No: he undoubtedly assembled in one single scene recollections of many evenings that were engraved in his memory and in that of his family. What he portrays is the summation of an entire period – the idea of a type of life. One gets a glimpse of the character of the actors not just as developed by the role they play in this scene, but also in terms of their habitual style and entire history. (60)

Personal memories are not only shaped by family memory but also by the individual's later conscious reflections and his identification with other social groups. As functional elements of an individual's and a group's ongoing process of identity formation, memories are, therefore, never quite stable but are continuously being re-created and re-interpreted. Due to the interactive relationship between individual and group, the distinction which Halbwachs makes between 'autobiographical memory' and 'historical memory' is only analytical.

Autobiographical memory is memory of events that an individual has experienced personally in the past. Historical memory is not remembered directly by the individual, but is stored by social institutions such as museums, political parties, schools and churches. However, the individual may integrate historical memory into autobiographical memory by reading, listening, and taking part in historical commemorations and festive occasions. This is indeed one of the ways in which an individual learns to identify his own life with a larger community, such as a nation. But Halbwachs stops short of elaborating this aspect in detail.

To help us understand the integration of personal and national memory, we therefore need to draw on other theories of memory. Theories developed within oral history are particularly relevant, not least for the way in which Eamon de Valera accounted for his own childhood.

In the 1980s, Richard Johnson and Graham Dawson, members of the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, studied how personal and national myth may interact. The ideas they developed were later elaborated by the Australian historian Alistair Thomson in *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. Thomson coined the aptly ambiguous term "composure" for the process of memory-making and described the choice of the term as follows:

In one sense we 'compose' or construct memories using the public language and meanings of our culture. In another we 'compose' memories which help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives, which gives us a feeling of composure. We remake or repress memories of experiences which are still painful and 'unsafe' because they do not easily accord with our present identity, or because their inherent traumas or tensions have never been solved. We seek composure, an alignment of our past, present and future lives. One key theoretical connection, and the link between the two senses of composure, is that the apparently private process of composing safe memories is in fact very public. Our memories are risky and painful if they do not conform with the public norms or versions of the past. We compose our memories so that they will fit with what is publicly acceptable, or, if we have been excluded from general public ac-

ceptance, we seek out particular publics which affirm our identities and the way we want to remember our lives. (Thomson, 241-42)

Thomson's theory of memory is a valuable addition to Halbwachs' pioneering approach to memory. Combining the two, I will, therefore, proceed to a discourse analysis of passages of de Valera's narrative of his childhood as described by Lord Longford and O'Neill. I will demonstrate how it reflects the interaction between personal memory and family memory, in the way Halbwachs suggests, and, from the perspective of Thomson's theory, how it may also be read as a composed and composing text repressing unresolved, personal tensions and traumas, additionally constructing 'safe' and 'meaningful' memories adapted not only to personal needs but also to popular expectations and public versions of the nation's past, thus integrating private into political story.

One of the crucial passages of the account is the one in which Eamon de Valera describes his separation from his mother in early childhood. Obviously, de Valera had few, if any personal memories of the first three years of his life and of this event, which proved to have a strong effect on his sense of self. Most of what he 'remembered,' thus, was derived from family memory, i.e. things he had been told later by his foster parents, the Colls of Bruree, after he had returned to Ireland from his 'exile' in America. Although he believed at that time that they were his own memories, they are more likely to have been composed of bits and pieces from family memory integrated into his personal memory during the process of identity formation he went through, finally becoming elements of his self-narrative.

The 'story of Eamon' begins with an account of how he grew up in a family disrupted by harsh social and personal circumstances. His mother, Kate Coll, was the daughter of a poor labouring family from a townland outside Bruree in Co. Limerick. In 1879, she had emigrated to the United States where she met Vivion de Valera, the son of a Spanish immigrant. Kate and Vivion married in 1881 and settled in Manhattan, where Eamon (registered at birth as George, but baptised as Edward) was born on 14 October 1882.

Vivion had originally studied to be a sculptor, but had injured an eye and therefore had to find other means of supporting himself and his wife. He first turned to book-keeping and then to teaching music, but without much success since his health "deteriorated," as the reader is told without being given any clue as to the precise nature of his ailments (1). It later appears that he suffered from tuberculosis.

However, it is not made quite clear exactly why Kate and Vivion "had to part in 1884 after less than three years of marriage" (2). It was the circumstances of their separation which later caused de Valera's problems as a child in Ireland and led to the suspicion that his parents were not married and that de Valera, therefore, was an 'illegitimate' child. Be that as it may, what is important for our purposes is the fact that de Valera himself believed – and wanted the public to know – that this was not so.

However, it cannot be denied that the account of his parents' separation – and the loss of his father – is remarkably depersonalised. It is explained as a product of fate and circumstance: they “had to part” – this is said in a manner that indicates it was not a result of their own decision.

Vivion seems to have accepted his father's ‘offer’ to send him to Denver, where the air was supposed to be healthier, leaving his wife and their two-year-old son behind in New York. We are then given to understand that had it not been for Kate's “reserves of inner strength which carried her through many crises” (2), she would not have endured, since for unknown reasons they were not given any similar offer of support from his family.

Hence, Kate had to continue working, as she seems to have done all along, due to her husband's bad health. As a consequence, she had to leave her infant in the care of another Bruree immigrant, Mrs Doyle. However, “[t]his arrangement was hardly ideal.” Therefore, “it” was decided – again, Kate's own part in the decision seems to have been deliberately toned down – to send him back to her own mother in Ireland, accompanied by her brother Pat, who had first joined her in New York but now had decided to return to Ireland (2).

De Valera's only memory of parting with his mother is conveyed in the form of a condensed image which reflects the trauma of his second experience of loss and separation. The experience is represented in a scene which pictures a child being moved into an unknown, empty space, “leaning over the teak rail of the ship and watching the blue-green sea spreading out in a broad tail behind him” (2).

We learn soon after that the reason for Kate's decision to send Eamon back to Ireland was that “the little boy would be much happier in the friendly Bruree atmosphere” (2). The experiences that Eamon de Valera later recalled from his life with the Colls in Bruree, however, cannot strike the reader as particularly happy. His first memory from the Coll house is waking up alone in a deserted house the morning after his arrival. Indeed, he has little to offer that may convince his readers that his mother's family were an ideal replacement for the loss of his mother's care and affection. Admittedly, we are told that he “grew particularly fond” of his Aunt Hannie (3). However, this is the only time we hear about any emotional attachment to members of his mother's family. Indeed, we learn almost nothing about them, apart from the fact that his grandmother was “not yet fifty” and “energetic” and that his Uncle Pat was “twenty-one” and “severe” in his punishments (2-3).

In the context of such information, his memories of “slender fifteen-year-old” Aunt Hannie might be seen as revealing the emotional deprivation he experienced as a child. Hannie seems to have been the sole object of his affections and a substitute for the mother he had lost. Eamon remembers how she used to lace his boots for him and dressed him up on special occasions “in the velvet suit he had brought with him from America,” thus reminding him of his mother. But it was only a few short years before she too “had to go to America.” The day she left from Bruree station,

“[g]randmother and child waved her goodbye, tearfully,” leaving him to endure yet another loss (3).

That this loss is associated with the loss of his real mother is indicated in the passage which follows immediately after:

America must have seemed no further away than Dublin to a child in Bruree, for the next year there was another arrival off the boat from New York. It was Kate de Valera home for a visit. There were a few glorious weeks and a trip to Limerick and then she went back again. Soon after her return she married Charles Wheelwright – Uncle Charlie to her son. (3)

Kate’s new married life had meant that she could stop working. However, surprisingly, she did not decide to send for her son. Her decision did not even change when Eamon, at the age of twelve, wrote a “firm letter” to his Aunt Hannie asking her to “persuade his mother to arrange for him to come to America” (5-6). Now that his grandmother had died (in 1895), his uncle was planning to get married and his closest friend was about to leave the village, Eamon apparently felt more lonely and isolated from the local community than ever before. The locals had always regarded his uncertain origins with suspicion and never accepted him as one of their own, a fact which was reflected in recurring clashes between Eamon and the boys of the village. However, there was no reaction to the letter.

Feelings of loss, hurt and solitude emanate from the “one vivid memory” (1) Eamon de Valera had preserved about his years as an infant with his mother in New York:

A large room in a New York apartment, 1885. Beside the fireplace sits a man. On the floor lies a small, fair-haired boy. A slim pale-faced young woman is bending over him, dressed in black. The child’s eyes are fixed wonderingly on the shiny metal fittings which ornament her handbag. (1)

This memory, with which the chapter opens, is a perfect illustration of how family memory may inform and shape individual memory. It may also serve to illustrate Halbwachs’ notion of memory as an expression of condensed feelings associated with a particular experience.

“This snapshot of the past is all that de Valera remembers of his American origins,” the biographers write (1), leading their readers to understand that the memory goes back to the days when he was in the care of Mrs Doyle. Later they refer to it as a “mental picture” (2). The latter term is probably the most accurate one, for it is not likely that there ever was such a photo. Nevertheless, it certainly does resemble one, for the scene is not seen through the eyes of the child himself, but from an external point of view. Rather than being a recollection of a single incident, it should therefore be regarded as a mental scene made up from a ‘core memory.’ Eamon de Valera’s core memory might have been the shiny “fittings” on his mother’s handbag encrusted by vague recollections of being the object of maternal love and care, and of his distant father, here represented by the unidentified man sitting next to the fireplace. These memories were given final shape by family memory later in his life.

Many of Eamon de Valera's childhood memories have political overtones. It seems to have been a deliberate wish on his part to narrate his childhood in a manner that made it clear to the public that his political convictions were based on personal experience, not abstract ideas. As initially explained, there were obvious political reasons for such an 'editorial' choice: in this way he could demonstrate his own roots in Irish soil and history and legitimise his political position as leader of the Irish nation. Such 'political' – or 'social' – memories illustrate Johnson's thesis that individual memory may be composed so that it conforms to public versions of the past, as some of the most obvious examples may serve to illustrate.

De Valera recalls the village of Bruree as "a very self-sufficient community," for example. Although the newly built railway "had opened it up to industrial goods," it still had the "fascinating craftsmen" of the traditional social and economic order, such as a cooper and three boot-makers (4). The village, in other words, is represented as an ideal, self-contained community, the kind of village de Valera knew from the novels of Charles Kickham, which he is known to have appreciated (Edwards 33-34; Comerford).

In this model community there was a foreign element, however: the barracks, "by no means a popular place" (4). It is with these barracks that de Valera's first political/public memory is associated: the response of the locals to the shooting of three people in Mitchelstown in 1887. A similar political memory is associated with his task of lookout when his uncle illegally grazed his cattle along the road.

At times, family and political/public memory are associated. Like so many others at that time, the Colls saw the land dispute as part of the national struggle, and their sympathy with Parnell and the Home Rule Movement was vividly illustrated on the walls of the loft of their cabin, which were covered with political cartoons from the *Weekly Freeman*.

Political/public memory was also kept alive by the local priest, indeed it was from him that de Valera learned to link local and personal experience with the political story of the nation. At Sunday mass, Father Eugene Sheehy, who had been a radical supporter of the National Land League and spent time in prison for that, would deliver "fiery sermons" in which he would combine the preaching of the gospel with the telling of local and national history (4). De Valera recalls via his two biographers:

Occasionally on St Munchin's Day, a parish holiday, he delivered his most famous sermons based on local Bruree history. Little de Valera sat with the other servers on the side steps of the altar drinking in every historic detail. Father Sheehy, eyes closed and long nose reaching his lips, retailed the golden exploits of bygone days, as if in ecstasy. By the time he checked his gold watch for the last time, Bruree seemed not only the capital of Limerick but of Munster and of Ireland. (4-5)

"Who knows what seeds of patriotism he sowed?," the biographers ask, stating the obvious. Dudley Edwards does not. On the contrary, he uses this particular memory for his thesis that it was in the local parish church that de Valera learned to identify

nation and faith and to play his role in politics as that of a 'priest-king' administering politico-religious doctrines and rituals to his people (Edwards 7-20).

Eamon got his first knowledge of Irish history from Father Sheehy's sermons, Irish history being absent from the curriculum at Bruree's national school. It was not until he enrolled at Blackrock College that he developed his perception of Irish history as reflecting a series of injustices suffered by its people. History was a central subject here. However, it is a memory from a lesson in elocution which gives the reader the most striking picture of de Valera's birth as a nationalist.

For that lesson, Eamon had been asked to prepare a recitation of Thomas Campbell's poem "The Downfall of Poland." Identifying completely with the theme and hero of this nationalist epic, de Valera recalls how he had rendered its lines so passionately that, upon finishing it, his teacher turned to the class and said jokingly, "I didn't think we had an O'Connell here" (8). "A truer word than he knew," is the biographers' comment.

The comment confirms the initial claim of this article that the first chapter of the biography consists of a selection of memories narrated by Eamon de Valera which all serve to show how seeds sown in the protagonist's childhood and youth grew in time into political flowers.

To conclude, the account of de Valera's childhood is a complex construct literally authorised by de Valera himself. Having been repeatedly told over many years it takes the final form of a narrative in which personal, family memory, and political history/social memory are integrated into 'autobiography.' This semi-autobiographical chapter, then, should be regarded as 'composure' in two senses. Firstly, it represents composure in the sense that it was by such self-narrative that de Valera was capable of repressing uncomfortable memories of abandonment and loss. It represented a self-interpretation which gave meaning to his life and stability to his identity. It was also composure in the sense that it was in full accord with public norms and political notions of Irishness and Irish history.

De Valera's self-narrative served him in his political career by rooting him in a genuine Irishry. In this way he felt justified in acting and speaking on behalf of the Irish people. Re-presenting himself, he was able to claim that he represented Ireland, indeed, that he knew the heart of the Irish nation and knew what the Irish people wanted.

As I hope to have demonstrated, however, as much as appropriating Ireland by means of his own self-narrative, he appears to have appropriated himself.

Works Cited

- Bowman, John. "Seven Lives." *De Valera and His Times*. Ed. J.P. O'Carroll and John A. Murphy. Cork: Cork UP, 1983. 182-193.
- Comerford, R.V. *Charles J. Kickham: A Study in Irish Nationalism and Literature*. Dublin: Wolfhound, 1979.
- Dáil Eireann, Public Sessions* 6 Jan. 1922.
- Edwards, Owen Dudley. *Éamon de Valera*. Cardiff: GPC Books, 1987.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1992.
- Johnson, Richard, and Graham Dawson. "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method." *Making Histories: Studies in History, Writing and Politics*. Ed. Richard Johnson et al. London: Hutchinson, 1982. 205-252.
- Lee, Joseph. *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Lee, Joseph, and Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh. *The Age of de Valera*. Dublin: Ward River Press, 1982.
- MacManus, M.J. *Eamon de Valera*. Dublin and Cork: Talbot Press, 1944.
- Pakenham, Francis Aungier, Earl of Longford, and Thomas P. O'Neill. *Eamon de Valera*. London: Hutchinson, 1970.
- Thomson, Alistair. "Anzac Memories: Putting Popular Memory Theory into Practice in Australia." *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*. Ed. Anna Green and Kathleen Troup. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999. 239-252.